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ABSTRACT

Communication consulting is one way academicians can help businesses to improve their employees' communication skills. Benefits teachers can derive from "academic" consulting include (1) experience that can supplement classroom materials, (2) opportunities for research in "real" settings, (3) additional income, and (4) personal growth. Consulting also provides benefits for the teacher's institution, such as internships for students and faculty, jobs for students, research grants, and visibility in the industry. For the client, contracting academic consulting services can mean quality service at a lower cost and from qualified researchers. Promotion of consulting services can be accomplished by establishing contacts within professional organizations or developing a partnership with someone already in the consulting business. Once a consultant is established, new contacts will develop from recommendations. Consultants should develop the habit of contracting with a client early in their consulting career. Conditions to consider for the contract include fees and procedures under which the contract can be terminated. (HTH)

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PERFORMING COMMUNICATION CONSULTING: AN ESSAY ON THE WHY AND THE HOW

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ABSTRACT

For years now, industry has been telling academia that employees (including managers) need improved communication skills. One logical way to assist in meeting this need is through academic consulting. However, few academic personnel are involved in this exciting and worthwhile endeavor. This paper is written to persuade academicians to get involved in communication consulting.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to share the combined consulting experiences of the authors in order to assist the reader in understanding better the mechanics and the motives involved in this often-misunderstood activity. This essay will examine consulting from the perspective of the consultant, institution, and client. This will be followed by discussing methods to promote consulting.

Before we delve into these areas, let's say a few words regarding consulting in the area of "communication." Although we will not discuss "communication" consulting per se in this paper, keep in mind that the consulting tips presented are somewhat universal (i.e., they relate to academic counsulting in general). However, we assure you that there is a very high need (thus demand) for academic consulting in communication skills (both oral and written). So, if the demand is out there and we possess the skills, why aren't we more involved. Perhaps it is because we haven't considered the Why and How. Let's begin now by examining the Why.

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BENEFITS TO THE CONSULTANT: THE WHY

This section identifies some of the major benefits that may be derived from "academic" consulting. The purpose is to help sell you, your client, and your university on the merits of academic consulting.

Relevance to Teaching Material

All too often, we hear students question the relevance of course material. This question never happens when one is able to supplement the material with experiences from consulting relationships.

Action Research

We have found that the consulting relationship provides an opportunity to do research in actual (action) settings. All too often research is either conducted in classroom settings or involves a mail survey instrument. Both approaches are rather artificial or detached from the "real" world. Action research (White, Cochran, & Latham, 1979) provides an opportunity to publish and present research that has practical application. In an action research situation the researchers/consultants assist the organization in solving a "real" problem and at the same time collect data to test theory. Admittedly, this action research approach is not easy, since adequate research controls are frequently not allowed by the client. However, many qualitative research projects can result in published cases.

Income

Research on consulting fees is not current. The most recent was reported in 1979 (Gore & Wright, 1979, p. 49). Gore and Wright report the daily range to be $75 to $1,000, with a mean of $368. Based on our experience, we believe that the figures today would be $100 to $1,500 daily, with a mean of $500.

Continuous Process of Personal Growth

We have found our experience from consulting to be as rewarding as, if not more rewarding than, other research. To take a client from the point of experiencing a great deal of pain to a point of self reliance is as rewarding as a physician helping a patient experience relief. Consulting experiences help build confidence in skills as a teacher and researcher.

BENEFITS TO THE INSTITUTION: THE WHY

The would-be consultant should learn and augment the benefits that the institution receives from the consulting activity. We present the benefits to the consultant primarily to motivate the individual to consider the activity. We indicate the benefits to the institution to illustrate how one potential consultant can motivate the institution to permit such activity. One should never try to convince the institution by presenting the benefits to the consultant.

Some of the benefits that we have been able to develop for our institution are (1) internships for students and faculty, (2) jobs for students, (3) visibility in the industry, (4) research, (5) grants, (6) contract research, and (7) recruiting of students. All of these can result from your consulting contacts.

BENEFITS TO THE CLIENT: THE WHY

Knowledge of these benefits helps sell services to the prospective client.

Cost/Overhead

The university-based consultant can provide quality service for less cost, and this inexpensiveness should be a major selling point. Certainly, it is less expensive to hire a consultant for one project than to have an inside change-agent on the payroll. In addition, an independent consultant can provide services with very little overhead as compared to a major consulting firm.

Research from Qualified People

University-based consultants have been trained in the methods of research. In addition, the active university consultant may have been exposed to other situations which provide knowledge and skills that others have been unable to acquire.

There is possibly a greater storehouse of knowledge at the university than could be available from a non-university connected consultant. If knowledge and abilities are needed in an area outside the expertise of the consultant, one consultant can call on another at the university. For example, if either of us were to be confronted with a production problem, we would not handle it. We would refer it to our colleague who is an expert in this area.

Training and Teaching

Very often, consulting relationships lead to training of employees. The university consultant's primary role is teaching; therefore, he/she is suited for this task where other consultants may not be.

PROMOTING YOURSELF: THE HOW

So far, we have presented evidence to motivate you, your institution, and the prospective client to enter the academic/consultant relationship. Now, it is time to present some of the "how to" functions of consulting, or how to promote yourself. The following ideas represent some of the methods that we have used. Certainly, there are others. Once you have established yourself as a consultant, new contacts develop from a satisfied client's recommending your services, or from a colleague who is aware of your skills area and expertise.

If one is involved with training, there is a built-in source for consulting. Training often uncovers problem areas that need to be researched further.

For those not so experienced, we suggest that you develop high visibility through involvement in trade associations, and in the "roast beef and mashed potato circuit." Many consulting engagements have been started through a company representative's hearing a speech given by a dynamic faculty member. Incidentally, many of these speeches are "freebees" (at least in the short run). It takes time to develop contacts, but things worthwhile generally do take time.

McManus (1979, p. 46) has presented several methods of developing initial contacts, and these are presented in Table I.

The best method, if available, is to develop a partnership with someone in the consulting business. Here, one can develop sources and have a mentor to help cultivate skills.

CONTRACTING: THE HOW

The consultant should develop the habit of contracting with the client very early in his/her consulting career. If the client does not feel comfortable in contracting initially, ask that he/she will contract at your next meeting. This exercise of patience sets the stage for the contract. Spell out all conditions in the contract. Some of the conditions you will want to consider are (1) fees, (2) procedure by which the contract can be terminated,

Table I. Methods of Developing Initial Contacts

Initial Contacts Result from	Number of Professors Mentioning Item: (N = 18)
Referral by colleague professor	10
Referral by other/past clients	9
Publications	9
Speeches and lectures (professor typically approached after lecture by new client)	8
Former students	3
Friends, personal "contacts"	3
Direct solicitation (professor sends out proposal, letter of "interest" to potential client)	3
Listing name and professional association for speaking engagements--e.g., AIB, NICB	3

(3) duration of assignment, (4) resources available, and (5) permission to publish the results.

CONCLUSION: THE CHALLENGE

Our challenge to you is to get involved in academic consulting. Why? It is to benefit you, your institution, and the many potential clients that are needing your skills. Organizations are in desperate need of your communication skills. We trust you will find academic consulting as rewarding as we have.

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